

ATLANTIS RISING

L.A. Banks

-an exclusive short story-

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"Atlantis Rising"

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Even standing on the deck of Monty's yacht, the full team of his warrior Neteru Guardian brothers and sisters standing around, for a moment there was only himself and Damali. Carlos stared at his wife. Damali was the center of his attention, the very epicenter of his universe. The fact that they were sailing into parts of the world unknown on the eve of Armageddon didn't matter. Perhaps it was because their mission to supposedly save the world was so bleak that he took liberty to wax philosophical, stealing a fraction of peace provided between the splinters of time to savor his memories of everything good that she'd brought to his life.

She was his world. Not this raggedy shell of blue marble spinning on its axis in grand space. Without Damali, existence would have been a wicked angry bitch—it wouldn't have been living or worth a damn.

Light winds had begun to kick up, the breeze lifting the edges of Damali's velvety-brown dreadlocks. Change was in the air, was set on the horizon. He could feel it, knew it in his soul like he knew his name. Some things simply registered at gut level. Just like he'd come from the streets, and no matter how much education or refinement he received, he'd still have that back alley instinct... The same held true for his old days as a vampire. Once he'd been to Hell, seated at the pentagram bargaining table and given a throne at the Council Level, some shit was just innate, even if the Light had granted him a reprieve.

That was why Damali was his world. She was his joy. She was the blade that could make him bleed. She was embedded in the code of who he was and would ever be. They had come up together, had gone through it *all* together. But even with that, she'd never been a part of Hell's infrastructure like he had, and some things he was glad she'd never experienced.

He knew how bad *bad* could really get. Knew it the same way one could tell a brother was about to pull a nine when a deal went down foul. Could feel heads about to roll, feel retaliation on the wind—could *taste it* like an electric charge in the atmosphere, just like one could sense a lightning strike. Yeah, this was thunder and motherfucking lightning, for sure.

And his gorgeous wife was carrying life within her. His lady was filled with his child, her heart open wide and about to burst because it contained so much hope.

Carlos glanced around at his team brothers. Every man on the ship had something to lose. Every one of them had a beloved partner, a wife he'd take a bullet for or give his last gasp of air to if...when something went down. Fear was written all over their faces; his old vamp nose could smell it in their adrenaline and their sweat. But it wasn't because his warrior brothers were punks. Carlos shook his head. Nah... his boyz were scared to death that they wouldn't be able to protect that which was most precious to them—not their own lives, but that of their pregnant wives.

Every man on the vessel had his own world, his own universe—damn the collective. Yeah, they'd fight as a unit, always. That was family. But truth be told, it was about preserving the peace and safety within one's own universe. That was written on every man's face, too. That was the thing that was so dangerous. Every single brother was at max emotional capacity and ready to wig. Crazy thing was, he not only could dig it, but was right there with them, literally in the same boat.

Carlos leaned against the rails, slowly shaking his head, the irony of it all making him chuckle under his breath. Damali neared him and threaded her arm around his waist, causing him to lean into her warmth and soak it all into his bones.

"You okay?" she murmured, leaning against his shoulder as he put his arm around her.

"Yeah, just taking it all in," he said, deflecting her question. He turned toward her and pulled her closer, breathing in the gentle scent of her hair, relishing the softness of her skin as his hands glided down her toned arms.

"You're not okay," she said quietly, and then brushed his mouth with a kiss.

He tried to smile, but staring into her deep brown eyes had always been his truth serum. "I'm just a little tight, thinking about all the precious cargo this yacht is carrying. I'm cool, though. Just... It's all good."

He hugged her, glad that she just let it go. Glad that she didn't ask about the wildfire burning in his mind and savaging the edges of his sanity. In her condition, she didn't need to be thinking about all of that. It was only the first trimester, and neither she nor the rest of her sister warriors were showing. The last thing in the world he wanted to do was get into a debate about their battlefield prowess or ability to handle themselves in a firefight. It wasn't about all of that. It wasn't about being so-called politically correct. This was primitive, primal, and very, very male. He hugged his wife tighter. Jesus help them if this woman or the baby she carried got hurt.

Her gentle touch lightly stroked his back. Thick ropes of muscles were corded so tightly in his neck, back, and shoulders that it felt like his spine might snap. She kissed him tenderly on his jaw.

"Baby," Damali whispered. "You're not even breathing." She pulled back and stared into his eyes for a moment.

He looked away. "I'm good."

"No-- "

"Don't worry about anything," he said, trying to sound calm, using street swagger as a cover. "I got this."

She nodded, her voice mercifully tender, her eyes showing her understanding. "I know. And I got you. Don't forget that."

This time she hugged him and he traced the supple curve of her back, his broad palms gliding over her shoulder blades, feeling that mystical, magical, miraculous place where her wings were hidden beneath seemingly normal human flesh. She was his angel, more than his wife. She'd delivered him from death, hell, and destruction, and now carried *life*.

"You are so beautiful," he murmured, allowing his gaze to drink in the richness of her cinnamon-brown skin. The curves of her face drew his thumb, and he traced her delicate brow and the line of her cheek, branding her image into his mind for the thousandth time... remembering the soft timber of her voice when he loved her tender, and how it could shatter glass when he loved her hard and wild. "They sent the wrong man to do

this job," he finally admitted in a quiet tone, staring into her eyes.

"Because you are my Armageddon, the only thing that could destroy me if anything ever happened to you... and the only reason I'm out here ready to knuckle with the Devil himself is because I can't let anything happen to you."

"Oh, baby, don't say that," she whispered, closing her eyes. "One person isn't as important as all humanity. You can't afford to think like that as one of the team's Neterus."

"I can't afford not to," he said, causing her to open her eyes and stare at him. "I can't lie to the Light, anyway. Why then should I lie to you?"

He kissed her slowly, his mouth tasting her softness as her body yielded to his. It was a perfect fit, a perfect design; one element made for and fused to the other, part of the grand design.

Her tongue met his in the familiar duet, a small sample of the divine, a promise of ecstasy if he served his mission well. A muffled moan escaped him. Oh, yeah, he'd slay a thousand demons just to stay by her side.

The rest of the team was so far away, each couple caught up in their own potential goodbyes and promises before battle. The muted purples and pinks of the Caribbean horizon danced before them. The sun was setting behind them, leaving outrageous streaks of azure, orange, fuchsia, and purple in its wake. The hues framed her, as if God had placed her in a

priceless watercolor canvas... But it was Damali that was the true work of art.

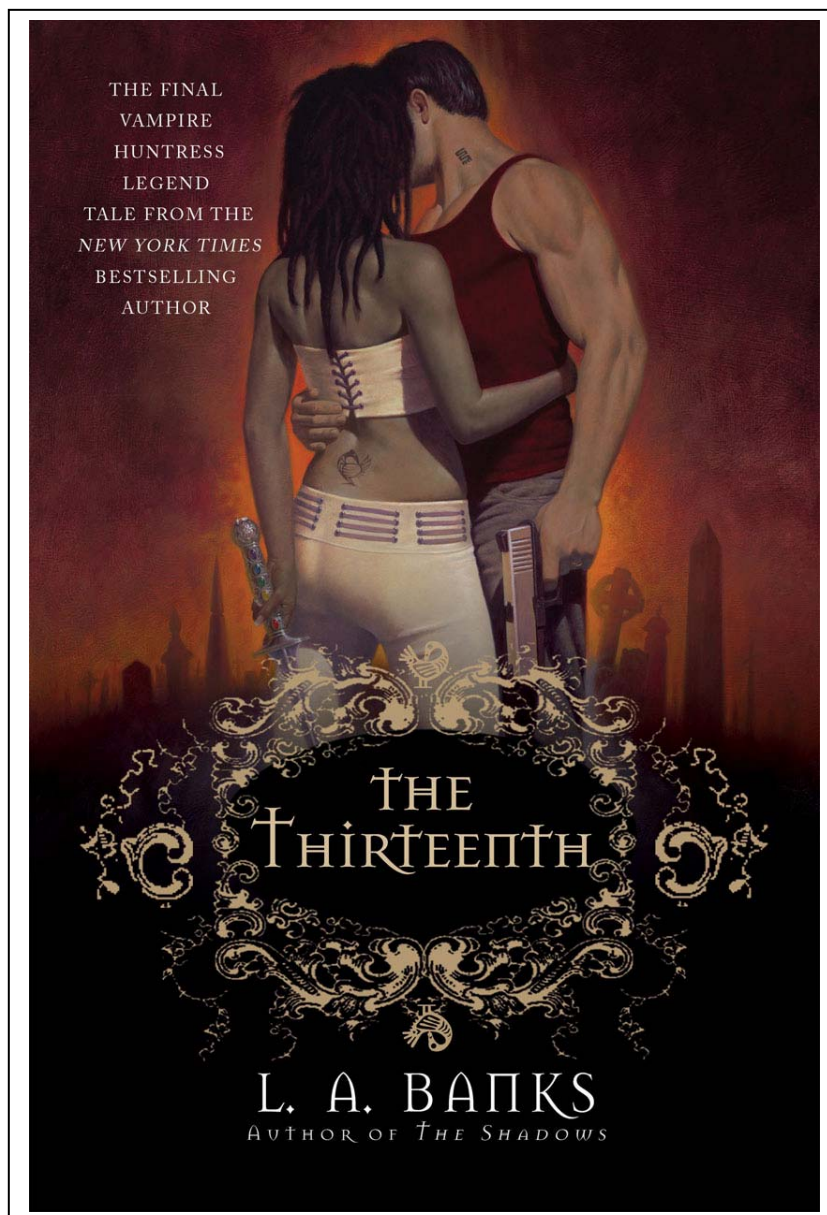
Carlos broke their kiss and then roughly pulled her to him, kissing the crown of her head as he enfolded her in his arms. It was an act of pure possession. It was an act of outright defiance. He wanted the heavens as well as Hell to know she was *his*. No matter what, they couldn't claim her, couldn't take her, couldn't kill her. No.

Breathing heavy, emotion caught in his throat. She returned his hug, her graceful hands on his skin letting him know she'd heard him loud and clear. As her healing touch began to soothe, his shoulders relaxed and his head dropped so that he could rest his cheek on the crown of her head. He closed his eyes slowly. *It's gonna be all right* rang in his mind like a mantra she'd planted. How did women do that with just a hug, he wondered? That was the real magic, the real stuff of legends. It didn't matter that Damali had a blade, knew jujitsu, and could blow up a demon lair with blessed C-4. What mattered was that she'd finally understood just what she meant to him. *To him*. Not to the world as the Neteru. Not the team as the co-leader. Not the warriors as a soldier... but to *him*.

Yeah, she was *his* Armageddon. In her arms was nothing short of The Rapture.

~end~

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